

EDITORIAL

Up In Smoke

'Sentence first — verdict afterwards,' said the Queen of Hearts in Lewis Carroll's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland." That could aptly describe the government's approach to the alleged health risks from secondhand smoke.

How else can you explain the huge gap in interpretations of the same evidence by the Environmental Protection Agency and the Congressional Research Service?

The EPA claims that "environmental tobacco smoke" is a Class A carcinogen that causes 3,000 lung cancer deaths each year.

So hazardous is ETS that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration wants to ban smoking in all workplaces — and force businesses to spend billions of dollars building separate smoking rooms ventilated to the outdoors — lest any wisp pass under the nose of a nonsmoker.

The EPA's conclusions weren't based on any original scientific research, but on an analysis of 30 epidemiological studies looking for a connection between lung cancer and secondhand smoke.

But the Congressional Research Service — an independent research arm of Congress — spent the past two years looking at the same data. It's hard to read the CRS report and not conclude that the EPA has badly misled the public on the health effects of environmental tobacco smoke.

The CRS findings, culled from its 70-plus page report:

- "The results are not definitive. And even at the greatest (exposure) levels, the measured risks are still subject to uncertainty."

- The "statistical evidence does not appear to support a conclusion that there are substantial health effects of passive smoking."

- "It is possible that very few or even no deaths can be attributed to ETS."

- "If there are any lung cancer deaths from ETS exposure, they are likely to be concentrated among those subjected to the greatest ... exposure levels, and, as a consequence, primarily among those nonsmokers subjected to significant spousal ETS."

- "Since lung cancer is a rare disease among nonsmokers, even a doubling of the risk would be a small risk compared, say, to the risk of lung cancer among smokers, or the risk of many other diseases and accidents."

Reading through the report shows the lengths to which the EPA had to go to arrive at its 3,000-deaths figure.

First, it assumed that environmental tobacco smoke is basically the same stuff inhaled by active smokers. That's a stretch.

Cigarette smoke is a volatile mix of chemicals that react with the air as they become

highly diluted. According to the CRS study, there is little information about what, exactly, remains in ETS. It notes that "an ETS chemist concluded that the evidence for ETS carcinogenicity *remains questionable*." (Emphasis added.)

Second, the EPA assumed that if a lot of smoke is bad, a little smoke is bad, too. It uses a "straight-line extrapolation" from high-dose active smokers to extremely low-dose passive smokers. In other words, in the EPA's world there is no threshold below which ETS poses zero risk.

And it had to assume that confounding variables are not a problem and that the people involved in the study provided accurate information. But these factors can easily overwhelm any findings of risk, the CRS notes.

Most damaging, however, is the fact that the EPA found no statistically significant evidence of a secondhand smoke-lung cancer link when it combined all 30 studies in what statisticians call a "meta-analysis."

So, the EPA simply lowered its standards for statistical significance.

Even then, the relative risk was found to be 1.19 — meaning that a passive smoker has an increased risk of lung cancer of 19%. Most epidemiologists are highly skeptical of a finding below 2.0 because it dramatically increases the chance that the result is a statistical fluke.

These attacks on the EPA's report are not new. But they had been coming principally from the tobacco industry — hardly a credible source on the issue.

Only a handful of independent scientists challenged the report, which is not surprising given that those who did saw their character smeared by the media.

Regulators and anti-smoking activists will have a much harder time discounting the CRS report. That might explain the thundering silence that greeted the study. A computer search found only one news story reporting on the findings.

But that may change. Sen. Wendell Ford, D-Ky., has called on the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to reopen hearings on its proposed smoking ban, charging OSHA with manipulating passive smoking data to "make their case."

That's a good start. But a wider investigation into government's abuse of science to push a social agenda is long past due.

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